



Manassas City Head Start

The Prince William County Head Start Program in Virginia received an HSBS Play Space Grant award in Fall 2009 to create a Natural Play Area for 3 classrooms at their Manassas City location. Staff utilized the HSBS Play Space Assessment to assess their play space and plan improvements. The enhancements have increased the children's range of experiences and boosted their outdoor exploration, creativity, excitement and adventure.

The Head Start Nutrition Specialist partnered with a local nursery for assistance in designing the foundation of the natural area. A grassy mound was created for children to be able to stand at the top of the "mountain" to command an audience and/or enjoy a roll down to stimulate their vestibular system. Six half-barrels were installed for sensory gardening activities-herbs to pick and sprinkle for their lunch, flowers to attract butterflies, vegetables to nurture and taste and mixed lettuces to make fresh salads. Additional new features included a boulder to rest on and reflect under a shade tree or to practice jumping skills, short and tall grasses to explore and hide in, natural logs to use for developing their balance and a variety of other shrubs to offer seasonal color, texture and smell. A welcoming arbor was made from recycled branches. Head Start staff, community members and vendors came together to create this exciting natural play space.

Manassas City Head Start held an official opening of the play area for children and their parents in January 2010 where an outside tour and demonstration had been scheduled but was cancelled due to weather. A presentation with photos of the new play area and an explanation of the health benefits of outdoor play was held instead.

Manassas City Head Start staff reported seeing children roll down the hill on a sunny day with one exclaiming with excitement: "That was cool!" as he went back to the top to do it again. Other children have been seen exploring in the dirt in the barrels and tall grasses for "seeds" and "bugs." There was a group jumping from the boulder and walking on the natural log balance beam. Teachers have bought seeds for the half-barrels and plan to introduce children to gardening in the Spring.

Congratulations to the Manassas City Head Start for their use of natural features to help promote physical activity at their center and for their use of community partners to help them achieve this wonderful outdoor play space!



